Fighter FOR SALE

by Jack Karney

Illustrated by Rafael De Soto

I'M standing on Colville's Main Street, matching stares with the town population. Every open-mouthed yokel who goes by gives me the once-over like I was a freak with earlaps. I pull up the collar of my jacket to shut out their prying eyes and wonder at the luck that brought me, Charlie Sloan, among these rooster-crowing strangers. I'm wearing a two-hundred-buck suit and thirty dollar shoes and in my pocket is the grand sum of three cents, three copper pennies.

Like a dream, I can still see that shiny, grinning face under the red mop of hair—Rocky Benson, dogging me for two weeks, grabbing my arm at every corner, pleading for my ear. That crazy red-headed kid. . . .

That day he visits my office I'm having company, Dave McGill's daughter, waiting for her old man to come and take her home. Lovely, blue-eyed Trina with her yellow hair lighting up the room, her sweet laugh like tiny, far-away bells. Then comes the knock, a light tap, no louder than the touch of a ping-pong ball, but starting more trouble than a hand grenade. Before I can answer, he's in, a lean-faced kid

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"Trina." I say, "tell me it's only a mirage."

Trina says, "Take a bromo. Maybe it'll go away."

"Mr. Sloan" —he hardly glances at Trina—"I'm mighty sick of this picketing business."

He's sick? He should have my ulcers, then he'd know what sickness is.

"This is your last chance," he says.

There's a smile playing around Trina's cupid's-bow lips. She's probably thinking that a Tamaroff henchman is preparing the shroud, like she told me would happen if I didn't stop playing pattycake with racketeers.

"Mr. Sloan," he says, "I've come a long way to join your stable."

I say, "I've plenty of fighters, as many as I can handle."

“Fighters you got?” he snickers.

“Tramps and has-beens. Glass-jawed hunks of meat—”

He has to remind me!

“Okay, okay,” I snap. “No use adding to my collection. Scram out of here.”

“You’re chasing a future champ,” he says, his red hair shaking like a banner.

“I’m giving you an A-l tip: I’ve got what it takes.”

He flexes his arms but remains gawking as Trina sighs.

“Oo-oh! Muscles!”

He gives her a look. “Mr. Sloan, there’s lots of managers cluttering up traffic, reaching out with hungry hands for a meal ticket. But I came to see Charlie Sloan, the guy who, I figured, could spot the real goods when it came along.”

“When it does, I will. Now I’m tired of this parleying. Get out before I throw you out on your ear.”

He’s got broad, powerfully built shoulders, but it can’t hurt to show Trina big guys don’t scare me.

He talks fast, “I don’t know why I’m breaking my neck pleading for you to make a fortune, only it’s a long way back to the coast. Mr. Sloan, I’m not a beginner. I’ve had twelve fights, won eight of them by knockouts, one by decision.”

“And the others?”

That contagious laugh again. “Sometimes it’s hard fighting with an empty stomach pressing against your spine.”

My throat is dry and tight. “Patsy,have a heart.” The words come tumbling, “They’re trying to frame me.”

I say, “I’ll give you a note to the Relief Bureau.”

The guy is a walking phonograph. “With me under your wing, with your connections and my hands, I’m headed for the championship. I’ll make it, you can bet your shirt.”

“Go home, bum,” I say.

His eyes go dull for a second and his knuckles are white doorknobs where he leans on my desk. There’s a flutter of wings in my stomach. Maybe I’ve overdone it, maybe he’s sore, maybe…But that grin comes back.

“Mr. Sloan, from now until I cop the crown, this hick town is my home.”

“Hick town?” Trina giggles. “I better get the hayseed out of my hair. Say, Alcatraz, where do you hail from?”

“Look, lady.” He turns a withering look over her shapely figure. “Be good, sit down and suck your thumb and I’ll throw you a couple of free tickets the day I box the Champ.”

The same day Churchill and Mussolini kiss in Macy’s window!

I think: I ought to send him to the gym and get him a dose of leather poisoning, administered by an expert.

He turns to me. “Mr. Sloan, I’m here only because my dad boxed for you. What was good enough for my dad should be good enough for me, I thought, but I guess I’m screwy.”

Then it hits me—that hair, those steel-gray eyes. “You’re Rocky Benson’s boy.”

He nods. “Yes. Rocky Benson, contender for the crown sixteen years back.” His eyes cloud. “Dad is sick in an institution. I saw him before I left. He still talks of Rocky Benson and his coming fight with the Champ. I’m gonna show him the headlines when his talk comes true. Me, Rocky Benson the Second, will make it. Dad missed. I won’t.”

Trina says, “Charlie, what can you lose, his head?” She’s laughing but underneath she’s serious. Maybe she sees something, maybe…

“Benson,” I say, “go down to Stillman’s. See Dave McGill, my trainer. Tell him you need a workout.”

I wonder if I’m developing softening of the cranium.

“Now you’re talking,” he says, “like you got brains.”

I say, “If the workout is too tough, just do a fadeaway, quietly, back to your old man.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back with bells on.”

Trina says, “Tell Pop—Mr. McGill to you—to hurry it up.”

He looks her up and down. “Poor Pop! So long, sister. You know, if your dress was two inches longer those knock-knees would be a family secret.”

Trina gasps and her mouth opens. As the door closes, she relaxes slowly. I don’t like the way her eyes go soft, the way she smiles. Her gaze comes back to me and I can feel my gray hair bristle. I get warm all over like I always do when she looks at me. I begin thinking: Some day that fat wife of mine will blow a blood vessel. Some day I’ll be free…

I say, “The kid’s old man wasn’t so hot. Had a punch, no brains. Took such a shellacking the last time out, he wound up walking on his heels.”

I’m having a swell conversation with myself. I crush my cigar in the ashtray. Finally she comes out of the fog. “Charlie, is my dress too short?”

You’d think the world crisis would be cleared up by my answer.

Rocky Benson has lots of workouts after that. As Dave McGill says, “He don’t know a right cross from a kick in the shins but he’s got heart and he’ll learn.”

Dave, for some reason, takes a liking to him. Works hard with him. Then, against my every instinct, talks me into getting Rocky a couple of fights with cripples, guys with visas from the local cemetery.

I don’t mind Dave sitting back and crowing like a rooster over Rocky Benson but when Trina suddenly becomes a student of the art of pugilism, that’s another horse.

One day she comes tripping into my office, a flash of yellow hair and green, clinging dress. She looks happy, too happy.

“Where you been?” I say. I know; I’m just asking.

She studies her face in the mirror. “Oh, in the gym, watching your protege swapping punches with some mattress.”

“My protege?” He and Hitler!

I say, “Spending a lot of time in the gym lately, huh, Trina?”

“What’s time when you got it on your hands? I spend hours waiting for that fresh guy to get his ears pinned back but he won’t cooperate.” She’s laughing to herself. “He has got cute ears, though, hasn’t he?”

They’ll look more cute cauliflowered.

She says, “Imagine him asking me for a date? Said it like I couldn’t say no.”

“Could you?” I crumple the cellophane and stick a cigar in my mouth.

She says, “What are you gonna do with a guy like that? He asks and before I know it, I say okay. Then I’m stuck.”

So am I. It smells bad, the whole setup.

She looks at her watch. “What’s keeling dad? Maybe I’ll meet him downstairs. I’ll run along Charlie. While I’m getting dolled for your future Champ I’ll think up a couple of digs that’ll take the starch out of him.”

Yeah, sure. That’s the beginning. And the end is always the same, too. Ask me, I know. That’s how I got hooked with that two hundred-pound tomato that calls herself Mrs. Sloan. When I think of slim shapely Trina…

I look in the mirror and my thatch of gray hair tells me I can’t wait much longer, that as long as Benson is around, I’m running out of the money.

Patsy Tamaroff’s got a beauty of an apartment.

If not he, who should?

After his two hungry-faced torpedoes get through surveying me and licking their chips, he says, “Well, my frien’, how you?” His mustache glistens from Vaseline.

“Okay, Patsy. I’m okay.” Except for my nervous ulcers.

“Patsy.” I get down to business How would you like a piece of my new boy, Rocky Benson?”

His eyebrows go up. “Benson? Good boy, no?”

“Yes.”

His eyes narrow shrewdly. “Why you wan’ to make me partner?”

“I’ve thrown business your way before. We’ve got along okay. Maybe Cm big-hearted. Maybe I need the dough.”

His big hand plays with a stubble of beard. “How much?”

“Five thousand. Here’s the contract. Make your cross here.”

“Funny guy,” he smiles. “Some day you get Tamaroff mad and he cut your throat. That be funny, too, no?”

“Don’t get sore. Patsy.” Patsy’s an ex-barber who specialized in wielding the razor. Me, I’ve had my shave.

After be signs I lean back in my chair and puff on a cigar. I say, “Patsy, I could use more dough. How about you?”

He laughs, showing off his big buck teeth. “What am I, an exception? You got tip. no? Some horse, he don’ feel good and maybe he get bellyache?”

“I was thinking of Benson. Next week he boxes Soldier Kane. A little bet, say five or ten thousand, on the Soldier, wouldn’t hurt.”

“Wouldn’t hurt who? You crazy? Benson kill him.”

“Patsy, frankly, as one partner to another. Benson will never amount to anything. I’ve been in the game too long not to know. Before we develop into social workers for the relief of punchdrunk fighters, let’s cash in. You use your influence on Benson to lay down. You can make him see daylight. You’ve done it on bigger guys. We bet on Kane. Benson loses. Next time he wins, once, twice, then he takes another dive. We clean up! It’s easy as A B C ”

He says. “Patsy Tamaroff, he never wen’ to school. I don’t like your ideas”

His torpedoes shift their feet and sigh, like a brother act.

I feel a rush of blood to my head. “You don’t?” Since when—”

“Rocky Benson, maybe some day he be Champ. THen I make a lot of money. Five, ten thousand? Pouf, for chicken food!”

“Patsy, listen—”

“I say no.” He gets up. “I gamble with Benson. I think he good fighter. Now beat it. Tamaroff need whole bunch of sleep.”

I curse myself for a fool. I shouldn’t have monkeyed around with Tamaroff, only I couldn’t have pulled the trick without him and his persuasive methods. I figured when Rocky Benson realized he could never get on top, he’d pack and go. If not, well, I’ve never yet seen a same who tied herself to a fighter that was sliding downhill….

Things move fast after that. Rocky Benson throws his concrete fists and is the stuffed opponents topple over. It’s monotonous. Week after week, all during the winter, up until the outdoor season, Rocky is cheered to the rafters in the neighborhood clubs. The publicity is terrific, pictures splashed on the sports pages, Patsy Tamaroff strutting like a new Papa Dionne.

What gets my nanny is the way Trina looks up at Benson after every victory. It’s sickening. One more year and hell be ready for the Champ. What’s going to happen between Rocky and Trina during that time? She’s changing, slowly, but I can see it. She uses more soap instead of make-up, her dresses are minus the fancy frills. She’s acting her age, which ain’t so hot for Charlie Sloan’s gray hairs.

I ask my wife for a divorce, promise to set her up right, give her enough dough every week to keep her going. I can’t make a play for a girl like Trina with a missus in the picture.

My wife says, “If that’s how it is, all right, Charlie. Instead of promises, I’ll take fifty thousand dollars in cash. Just to be sure.”

That’s a wife for you—live with her for twenty-two years and does she trust me? Fifty thousand. I haven’t got fifty hundred. I’ve been sleeping with Hard Luck ever since that Benson drifted into my office.

I’m turning the corner of Fifty-second when Trina, looking fresh and clean and full of life, almost runs past me.

I say, “Take it easy, stranger. How about saving hello to a friend?”

Her laugh tinkles. “Look, Charlie.” She’s got a brand-new wrist watch, platinum, with chips swimming around the dial. “Birthday present,” she beams. “That freshy Benson just slipped it on my wrist, kind of hard, because it won’t come off.”

It hurts inside. Benson gives her a watch. What next?

“I’m to meet Rocky,” she says. “Only he forgot to say where.”

“Rocky’ll be at my place right after he gets his gym workout. Come up. He’ll be along soon.”

She hesitates a second. “All right. I’ll tell that guy a thing or two.”

I say, “Like him, don’t you?”

It’s like cutting out my heart to ask.

She says, “A little. He’s not a bad lug.”

What am I, a dope? It’s written allover her in bright neon letters, whenever she talks about him, whenever she looks at him….

After we get settled I mix highballs. I sit down and her shoulder touches mine. I watch the ice floating around in my glass but I keep seeing yellow hair and blue, laughing eyes.

She says, “What’s Rocky doing, taking two workouts?”

I feel hot and cold. Her nearness upsets me.

I say, “Trina, I hate seeing a smart girl like you getting mixed up with a fighter who’ll wind up on his heels.”

She gets up and goes to the window. “Don’t talk like that, Charlie. Rocky is smart. All he wants in the championship. When he gets it, he’ll quit. If he thought it was out of his reach, he’d quit today. He told me so and I believe him.”

So do I. So what?

She leans on the window sill and looks out. Her bending form, the taunting curves, the sturdy, shapely legs—what am I, stone? I walk over to her. That tantalizing perfume gets in my nose, up into my head. I feel woozy around the knees.

Her blue, devilish eyes glance around at me and, like I’ve slapped her, her face freezes and she straightens up. I reach out and pull her close. She cries something but I’m tasting sweet, hot lips.

Like from a distance I head the knock on the door, first easy, then loud, staccato. She twists out of my arms. Her face is red, an angry red

that makes her prettier than ever.

“Why did you do that?” she asks.

I shrug. “My foot slipped.”

I fix my jacket and open the door. It’s Rocky, grinning like he’d hit in a Bingo game.

“Hello,” he says. His eyes travel from me to Trina and back again.

“Charlie,” he says, his smile disappearing, “wipe that lipstick off your lips. It doesn’t become you.”

Trina gasps. “Rocky, you don’t understand—”

“So I don’t, so what? Guess I never did, come to think of it. You and Charlie—”

“Don’t talk like a fool,” she says. “Rocky, I can explain.”

“Why?” he snaps. “What’s a little lipstick between friends? A little for me, a little for Charlie.”

“You are a fool,” she says.

“I heard you the first time,” he says.

Let them battle it out. A third guy always winds up in the middle.

He turns to me, lips a razor-edge line, eyes on fire. I tighten up. He looks crazy enough to kill.

I say, “It’s not lipstick, it’s blood. I cut myself. Rocky, don’t get excited.”

“Who’s excited? I want a fight with the Champ.”

“The Champ.”

“After which I’m getting out of here.”

Peace, it’s wonderful!

He’s not ready, but who am I to argue with a smart guy? The Champ will feed Rocky Benson enough leather to last him a lifetime. Let him wind up with his old man, listening to imaginary bells, comparing

yellow newspaper clippings.

A plan begins to shape itself in my fertile mind. I've worked it before and it clicked to a T. And if it was good enough for Rocky Benson, Senior, it'll be extra good for his offspring.

It's warm, sultry, the night of the big fight. The Stadium is jammed to the heavens with white-shirted figures screaming a welcome to the finalists.

Rocky scuffs his shoes in the resin impatient, jerky pawing. I laugh to myself. Before the night is over Charlie Sloan will be the proud owner of one hundred and twenty nice crisp thousand-dollar bills and Rocky Benson will be on his way to the cleaners. One hundred and twenty thousand bucks! Fifty thousand for that tub of lard wife and seventy thousand for me, to buy nice fluffy things for Trina. Do a million things with Trina. I've played my cards like the banker in a three-card monte game. Rocky Benson can't win. It's fixed and nobody can point his finger at me. That's the sweet part of it.

While the announcements and introductions are being made, I look around. Tamaroff, a big cigar stuck in his toothy pan, is sitting up front. Enjoy yourself, Tammy, my frien'. That grin will be wiped off so fast you'll have a case of lockjaw soon. Very soon.

Right after we signed the contracts in the Commissioner's office, I contacted Tamaroff. With my mouthpiece and his stale brain it takes me fifteen minutes to unload Rocky Benson, the coming Champ. I tell Patsy how sick I am of the game, how my ulcers are getting too temperamental, how the publicity, prestige and do-re-mi would make Patsy Tamaroff a junior Napoleon. The dumb dodo falls hard. The transfer is to be effective after the big fight, win or lose.

His mustache twitches like it's been invaded by fleas. "Yes," he says, "Patsy Tamaroff be big shot. And legitimate too. I make back the fifty t'ousand and maybe more. I bet Rocky beat the Champ. Poof! Tamaroff got fighter for nothing."

And Christmas over five months away!

The way Rocky feels about Trina, the way he's crazy mad to win the crown for his old man, he's a hunk of butter in my hands. He wants work and more work, ripping, tearing into the big bag, slugging with his sparring partners, lots of pounding the road—all of which falls right in with my plan. The Champ can beat him anyway, but why take chances?

Then Dave McGill sticks in his opinion. “He’s overdoing it. He’ll leave his fight in the gym. I don’t like it.”

I tell him he’s getting paid to work under me and that I’ll figure out how much training Rocky needs.

“Sure,” he says softly. “Only I can’t help thinking back to another guy by the name of Rocky Benson.”

“Stop making speeches. The old man was yellow. That’s why he folded. Rocky’ll be okay. He’ll take the Champ, knock him kicking.”

He talks some more and I let him build himself up to a letdown. In ten minutes he’s quit, which doesn’t make Charlie Sloan very mad. Now there’s nobody around who’s liable to get a brainstorm.

I get another trainer, Jimmy Malone, a guy who will play ball. Then I ban all reporters and spectators. Secret sessions, I say, to develop a Yogi punch. Once or twice I give the reporters and boxing officials a peek, a little one, so’s not to strain their eyesight, and they’re satisfied that Rocky Benson is in the best condition of his life.

I push Rocky hard—another round of shadow-boxing, more sparring, more roadwork, more everything. Sweat, you bum. He’s getting stale and don’t I know it. The week before the fight I go to the city, leaving strict instructions with Jimmy Malone to keep Benson on the move, just on this side of arthritis. I’ve got business, big business to attend to.

Almost the first one I bump into is Trina, who tries to pass me up like I got a touch of leprosy. She’s a doll, dressed in white, looking like she just stepped out of a bottle of creamy milk.

“C’mon, Trina,” I say. “Say all is forgiven. Say hello.”

“Hello,” she snaps. Then softly, “How’s Rocky?”

Still got Rocky on the brain. It won’t be for long.

“Rocky’s fine. Never better.”

She looks up at me and her eyes crinkle. “You can’t be that glad of it.”

I say, “I’d break out in a crying jag if it’d make you any happier, sweetheart. How about you and me—”

“Excuse me,” she says. “I’ve got a pass to a dog show.”

She should come to the Stadium next week and watch Rocky Benson.

I let her go. I've got to see Joe the bookie, a guy with rust-proof zippers on his lips. With Tamaroff's fifty grand as working capital why shouldn't I double it? Why not? Joe gets in touch with Tamaroff's bookie. Joe says he's looking for Benson money, ten thousand worth. Then, each day, to throw off suspicion, Joe bets a piece, and the day before the fight I've covered fifty thousand dollars of Tamaroff's money. No names, nothing. The Champ being seven to five, Joe lays out twenty grand for me, my probable share of the fight. I'm sitting pretty. Even my ulcers purr contentedly.

There's just one danger: Rocky is capable of exploding a left hook in the early rounds and upsetting all my work. But the Champ is a shrewdster who plays it safe, wears his man down to a blind stagger before putting over the finale. Maybe five, six rounds and Rocky Benson will come apart at the seams.

The gong startles me. The Champ comes out stabbing with his left, feeling out his man, gliding around nice and easy. Rocky hunches his shoulders, bores in, throwing a flurry of gloves, but the Champ catches them on his shoulders and arms, letting them slide off harmlessly. Rocky corners the Champ, hooks, misses, hooks again. The Champ ties him up neatly, punishing him inside with tricks Rocky never learned. They play tag along the ropes until the bell calls a rest.

Jimmy Malone gives me a hand, wiping Rocky's face, rinsing the mouthpiece, giving the customers a show. That's what they paid to see, a spectacle with fireworks, and they will….

Trina and Dave McGill are over to my left. She's pulling nervously on a handkerchief, her tongue wetting her red lips. Dave leans over and pats her hand. She smiles. Soon she'll bust out laughing.

The Champ's feet scrape harshly on the rough canvas. Oh, you Champ, you dream baby! Box the bum, cut him to ribbons. Splash that right, drown him!

Suddenly Rocky's left comes around and the Champ is up against the ropes, rocking on his feet from a wild bombardment. A hook, and the Champ is down on hands and knees, shaking the noises out of his bowed head. The crowd's yells clap like thunder in my head.

Get up, you Champ. One hundred and twenty grand, every nickel I got. Up, you big mattress, get off the floor!

At eight he's on his feet, moving away, desperately trying to avoid the rushing, crazy Benson. I don't feel so good. My insides tighten up in a hard knot, but

the sound of the bell works like magic, adding years to my life.

Take it easy, Rocky," I say. "Box him. Set him up first."

"I ain't got time," he says. "Me and the crowd, we're going home early."

Just a song at twilight.

The Champ, refreshed, is smiling confidently. He keeps on the move, flicking his left, straightening the crouching Rocky with snappy right uppercuts. The crowd settles back and I breathe easier.

One hundred and twenty thousand smackers. It keeps popping in my head in green flashes…Easy, Champ, easy. That Benson knows from nothing. Give him a chance and he's just dumb enough to knock you kicking. Stay away and he'll fall apart like a bombed shack. I promise it. Me, Charlie Sloan promises it on his life.

Tamaroff, his cigar now a lump of broken weeds, is scowling savagely. Poor donkey. Trina and Dave look worried. A couple of more rounds and they'll have nothing to worry about. Neither will I.

After the fourth stanza a bit of claret is moving about Rocky's lips and there's a cut over his left eye. He looks tired. The oil in his joints is drying up. He telegraphs his punches from here to Alaska. He eats leather, misses on the counter punch. He's as he should be and it's about time.

Malone dumps cooling water over Rocky's head. I splash colloidon in the cut and slap on a piece of adhesive. His whole face is red and bruised.

Through cracked lips, he says, "That guy can fight. Don't let anybody tell you different."

Okay, I won't.

"But I'll catch him," he says. "I'll beat him—for you, Charlie. Just for you."

For me he can do a Steve Brodie from the Washington monument.

Five, six, seven, eight rounds. What's keeping Benson up? The Champ follows the same tactics, jumping his left, crossing his right, stepping away, then walking in again, his fists moving like streaks of blurred light.

Then the Champ gets tired of playing baby games. You can see it in the way he hunches his shoulders, shuffles close, flatfooted. He steps inside a long left and pumps away inside. The adhesive comes away and the blood dribbles down, blinding Rocky. He grabs and holds but the Champ shifts to one side, throws two thundering rights to the head and trots to a neutral corner.

Nero and his second fiddles had nothing on this mob. Everybody is standing, cheering like a bunch of wacks. To me it's music, sweet and low and a hundred and twenty thousand bucks' worth. The referee's arm slices the thick air. Six, seven, eight….Rocky is up, out on his feet, waiting. The Champ's left comes around and Rocky's eyes go dull and flat and his mouth pops open. The bell.

Another round, Benson, just one more. How he went this far is just one of those things. He's out, but too stupid to lay down and get it over with. In the corner, his legs stretched out to their full length, the sweat and water dripping down his smashed face, he mutters, "I'll catch him, I'll catch him."

Sure you will, Nurmi, only you're all played out, left your fight with those sparring partners in the gym. Give up,sucker. Before you get your brains splattered over the canvas, get hep to yourself.

Then, in the middle of the tenth round, the sky comes down, stars and all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Rocky's left explodes and the Champ is going back on his heels. Everybody is up, gasping, then breaking out in a rash of cheers. The Champ grabs and holds with desperate strength but Rocky shakes him off. The Champ's mouthpiece flies across the ring and my heart goes with it. The left comes up from the floor. The Champ's knees go first, then the rest of him.

The blood pounds like a tom-tom in my head. Get up, you big hunk of beef. One hundred and twenty thousand bucks. Trina. Everything. C'mon, Champ. Benson's washed up, shot his bolt. Seven, eight, nine, the Champ's up, staggering. I hardly hear the bell.

Rocky comes back, grinning like a clown. "Surprise!" he says to me. "Told you I'd catch sonny boy. He can't outrun me forever. Confidentially, Charlie, how much is this gonna cost you?"

I'm floating on air. I open my mouth to answer but nothing comes out. I look at Malone. He looks away. All of the sudden he's bashful.

Rocky says, "Jimmy never told you we had company up at the training camp you spent in the city. Dave's a suspicious cuss, Charlie, especially after the way you got him to quit. That day you met Trina, she figured I might be lonesome.

"I couldn't help it," Jimmy whines. "Tamaroff said he'd cut my ear off if I talked."

Rocky says, "Dave to Trina to Tamaroff, a swell double-play, and you're out. Dave cleared the fog from my head, opened my eyes. I loafed that last week, took it easy."

Next week I must remember to make a date with a psycho. Why didn't I suspect something when Rocky was only two pounds under his fighting weight at the weigh-in? I should have, but I was so sure….

"It's snake-eyes, Charlie," Rocky says. You lose."

I find my tongue. "I'm still rolling the dice. The Champ's knocking you dizzy."

He looks surprised. "I think you got something there."

The warning whistle. I get out on the apron of the ring. He says, "I'll catch him again, Charlie. I've got lots of salt on his tail."

And he does, in the middle of the eleventh. A left, and the Champ clutches atmosphere like a blind man. Then the right. The Champ spins slowly around, slops over, crumples on the canvas. I've got to get away, far away, where I can get a shot of novocaine jabbed into my head. One minute I've got a fortune, then I got labor pains. I see Trina, hanging onto Rocky's arms, smiling up at him, and I almost knock over two guys who block my exit. Outside I got company, Tamaroff and his boys.

"Hullo, my frien'," Patsy says. He's got his hands in his pockets and it doesn't look right. A big black sedan drives up and I feel sick.

I'm a goner, I figure. Say your prayers, Charlie. My throat is dry and tight.

Tamaroff says, "Trina, she nice girl,no?" She and her father, they come to Tamaroff. She say, 'Mister Tamaroff, you partners with

Charlie, no?'"

He jabs his elbows into my ribs. "I don't tell them Benson is all mine. I don't tell them because they die from laughing."

"Patsy, listen—"

"Shut your mouth," he growls. "Tamaroff is talking. Trina say, 'Maybe Rocky, he don feel good.' Her father say, 'No maybe 'bout it. I don' trust Sloan.'" He shrugs. "We go see Rocky. What you know? They right."

"Patsy, have a heart." The words come tumbling. "They're screwy. They're trying to frame me—"

"Then I find out who get Tamaroff's money if Benson no win. I have a talk with Joe the bookie and who you think is lucky guy?"

I get the jackpot, slugs and all.

"Patsy, for old times' sake— What good's knocking me off?"

"Knock you off? What am I, a gangster?" He's insulted. "No. Tamaroff your frien'. How much money you got?"

"Twenty, thirty dollars."

"My boys buy you ticket with your money. You take little trip, twenty, thirty dollars' worth. My boys keep you company, so you don' get lonesome. But, Charlie, my frien', do Tamaroff a favor. Don' come back. Tamaroff don' like funerals. They make him too sad."

ONE-WAY ticket to Colville, that's what my money bought me, leaving me three cents, three lousy coins. I take them out and look at Lincoln, leering up at me. A sweep of my hand and they sail out into the dusty gutter. What's money to Charlie Sloan? I can always eat my two-hundred-buck suit and spiffy shoes. It's getting dark. The streets are deserted and it's chilly. What does a guy do now?

THE END